

P 020951Z MAR 88
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6461

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 01177

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PREL IZ
SUBJECT: THE REGIME IS PART OF THE PROBLEM

11. (SECRET-ENTIRE TEXT)

12. SUMMARY. IRAQI MORALE IS AT A LOW POINT, ALTHOUGH IRAQIS REMAIN AS WEARILY DETERMINED AS EVER NOT TO LOSE THE WAR. SEVERAL RECENT GOVERNMENT ACTIONS -- RENEWED POPULAR ARMY RECRUITING, THE EX POST FACTO CANCELLATION OF AN AMNESTY FOR DESERTERS, AND THE BUNGLED EVACUATION EXERCISE -- ARE LARGELY RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS DIP. EROSION OF LIVING STANDARDS THROUGH INFLATION REMAINS A SERIOUS LONG TERM PROBLEM. THE RECENT MISSILE EXCHANGE HAS ADDED TO CIVILIAN FEARS. IT HAS ALSO GIVEN A BOOST TO THE MORALE OF SOME TO SEE IRAQ ABLE TO STRIKE BACK AT TEHRAN, BUT THIS POSITIVE EFFECT WILL DISSIPATE IF THE EXCHANGE CONTINUES VERY LONG. OFFICIAL BRAVADO IS A RESULT OF LOCAL MACHISMO AND A DESIRE TO BOOST SAGGING HOME-FRONT MORALE. END SUMMARY.

13. IN THE OPINION OF THE AMBASSADOR, CIVILIAN MORALE IN BAGHDAD IS CURRENTLY LOWER THAN AT ANY TIME DURING HIS THIRTY-NINE MONTHS AT POST. WHILE THE QUESTION MAY NOT BE CRITICAL FOR IRAQ, SINCE IRAQIS SOMEHOW DO AND MUST KEEP ON WITH THEIR DAILY LIVES IN THE FACE OF OFFICIAL COMPULSION AND POSSESS A GENUINE IF WEARY DETERMINATION NOT TO BE DEFEATED BY A DESPISED IRANIAN REGIME, THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BURDEN IS MORE ANGUISHING NOW THAN IN RECENT MEMORY.

14. UNFORTUNATELY FOR THE IRAQIS, MUCH OF THE ADDED BURDEN ON MORALE IS DUE DECISIONS AND MISCALCULATIONS BY THEIR OWN GOVERNMENT IN RECENT MONTHS, INCLUDING:

-- 1) A MAJOR REAPPEARANCE OF POPULAR ARMY PRESS GANGS AFTER AN ABSENCE OF A YEAR. ONE EXPLANATION IS THAT THE REGIME IS RAISING UNITS TO REPLACE KURDISH TRIBAL IRREGULAR UNITS DOING GARRISON AND REAR-AREA PATROL DUTY, SINCE THESE UNITS ARE CONSIDERED EVEN LESS RELIABLE IN THE WAKE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S WHOLESALERE DESTRUCTION OF KURDISH VILLAGES. (THE STREET RUMOR IS THAT THREE-FOURTHS OF THE NEW PA FORCES WILL GO NORTH TO KURDISTAN; ONE FOURTH TO GUARD PIPELINE.) MIDDLE-AGED BAGHDADIS REALLY FEAR DUTY IN KURDISTAN, EXPECTING TO HAVE THEIR THROATS CUT IN THE DARK OF NIGHT. ANOTHER EXPLANATION IS THAT AFTER A YEAR OF RECRUITING INACTIVITY, MANY PA UNITS ARE DUE TO BE DEMOBILIZED AFTER THEIR FOURTEEN MONTHS DUTY PERIOD AND MUST NOW BE REPLACED WHOLESALERE.

-- 2) THE EX POST FACTO CANCELLATION BY SADDAM OF THE LAST AMNESTY DECLARED IN JANUARY. MANY IRAQIS ACCUSE THE REGIME OF LURING DESERTERS IN TO SENTENCE THEM TO PRISON AND SOME TO EXECUTION. THIS PERCEIVED DOUBLE-DEALING HAS HARMED THE REGIME'S ALREADY POOR CREDIBILITY WITH ITS OWN PEOPLE.

-- 3) THE BUNGLED EVACUATION EXERCISE CANCELLED IN LATE FEBRUARY. THE GOVERNMENT'S CHARACTERISTIC FAILURE TO EXPLAIN ITSELF AND THE POPULATION'S USUAL PENCHANT FOR WILD RUMORS IN THE TOTAL ABSENCE OF RELIABLE INFORMATION SOWED REAL PANIC, WITH RUMORS OF IMPENDING NUCLEAR ATTACK, CHEMICAL WARFARE, AND FLOODING DUE TO THE COLLAPSE OF THE SADDAM TIGRIS DAM NEAR MOSUL.

15. A LONGER TERM SERIOUS PROBLEM FOR IRAQIS REMAINS THE STEADY EROSION OF THEIR STANDARD OF LIVING THROUGH STEADY INFLATION IN THE FACE OF A NINE-YEAR GOVERNMENT WAGE FREEZE AND THE DRAFTING ONE AFTER

ANOTHER OF WORKING MALE FAMILY MEMBERS. A HIGH GOVERNMENT MONTHLY SALARY OF 250 DINARS (800 DOLLARS AT THE OFFICIAL RATE, 125 AT THE BLACK MARKET AND REAL VALUE RATE) BUYS LITTLE WHEN MEAT ON THE BONE COSTS NINE DINARS A KILO AND A KILO OF FRUITS OR VEGETABLES TWO TO THREE DINARS.

¶6. ONE NOTICEABLE RESULT OF THESE CURRENT PRESSURES HAS BEEN THE GROWING NUMBER OF BAGHDADIS MOVING THEIR FAMILIES OUT OF THE CITY OR MAKING ALTERNATIVE EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATIONS ARRANGEMENTS ELSEWHERE. THE EVACUATION EXERCISE AND THE LATEST MISSILE EXCHANGE WITH IRAN HAVE ACCELERATED THIS TREND. (THE AMBASSADOR'S NEAREST NEIGHBOR, ONE OF IRAQ'S RICHEST BUSINESSMEN, HAS DECAMPED TO MOSUL AND POORER PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO MOVE IN WITH RELATIVES ELSEWHERE.) WE DO NOT EXPECT ANY WHOLESALE FLIGHT, BUT TRAFFIC IN BADHDAD IS CURRENTLY NOTICEABLY LIGHTER THAN USUAL.

¶7. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHAT THE LONGER-TERM EFFECT OF THE MISSILE EXCHANGE WILL BE. FOR MANY, IF NOT MOST, IT HAS MEANT FEAR. OTHERS ARE PLEASED TO SEE IRAQ AT LAST ABLE TO RESPOND IN KIND AND IN FORCE TO PREVIOUS IRANIAN SCUD ATTACKS ON BAGHDAD AND HOPE IT WILL FRIGHTEN IRAN FROM FURTHER ATTACKS. IF, AS WE WOULD EXPECT, IRAN RESPONDS INSTEAD WITH MORE SCUDS, THESE LATTER PEOPLE WILL LIKELY LOSE THIS OPTIMISTIC INTERPRETATION. FINALLY SOME GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, INCLUDING A NORMALLY PACIFIC MFA SOURCE, ARGUE THAT IRAQ SHOULD ENCOURAGE A MAJOR IRANIAN ATTACK SINCE THE IRAQI ARMY HAS NEVER BEEN STRONGER, ITS MORALE BETTER, WHILE THE IRANIANS ARE HAVING DIFFICULTY MOBILIZING. WE PUT THIS VIEW DOWN TO OFFICIAL BRAVADO ARISING OUT OF A RESURGENCE OF IRAQI MACHISMO AND A DESIRE TO COMBAT SAGGING HOME-FRONT MORALE.

NEWTON